Declassified and Approved For Release 2012/09/25 : CIA-RDP90-00965R000302010007-2

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WALL STREET JOURNAL
5 November 1985

KGB Official Says He Didn't Defect, Accuses U.S. Agents of Kidnapping Him

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WASHINGTON – Vitaly Yurchenko, prized by the U.S. as one of the highest-ranking KGB officials ever to defect, denied that he had defected and insisted he had been kidnapped by U.S. agents.

He said he would return to the Soviet Union.

Mr. Yurchenko, who reportedly gave the Central Intelligence Agency valuable new information on KGB spy operations throughout the world, was the star of an unprecedented press conference at the Soviet Embassy here yesterday. Contending that he had escaped from the CIA, he said he didn't remember giving the CIA any secret information.

Mr. Yurchenko said he was seized and drugged by "some unknown persons" while visiting Rome in August and was taken to the U.S. unconscious. He told a hastily assembled pool of U.S. and Soviet reporters that for three months he was interrogated and tortured at a CIA facility near Fredricksburg, Va.

Likely Embarrassment to U.S.

The Yurchenko incident is likely to be a major embarrassment to the U.S., just a few weeks before the summit between President Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Mr. Yurchenko's apparent defection to the West in August was viewed as a big embarrassment to the Soviets.

U.S. officials, shocked by Mr. Yurchenko's sudden appearance on television last night, scrambled to rebut his accusations, asserting that he came to the U.S. voluntarily and that he had disappeared while supposedly going to dinner Saturday.

The State Department suggested that Mr. Yurchenko somehow may have been captured and coerced by Soviet agents. John Whitehead, acting secretary of state, warned Soviet embassy officials that "before we allow Yurchenko to leave this country, we will insist on a meeting with him in an environment free of Soviet coercion to satisfy ourselves about his real intentions."

It was the third time in one week that an apparent Russian defector had returned to Soviet custody. Mr. Yurchenko's announcement came on the heels of the return of a Soviet seaman who jumped ship in Louisiana and the return of a Soviet enlisted man who had sought sanctuary in the U.S. embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan.

'My Torturers'

The Soviets staged Mr. Yurchenko's mysterious reappearance for maximum propaganda effect. Appearing excited and eager to tell his story, Mr. Yurchenko repeatedly said his human rights had been violated at the hands of people he described as "my torturers."

Sen. David Durenberger (R., Minn.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said CIA Director William J. Casey told him that Mr. Yurchenko hadn't shown up for a scheduled dinner Saturday night with CIA agents. Sometime after that, Mr. Yurchenko called the CIA and told agency officials that they would see him next on television.

Both Sen. Durenberger and the vice chairman of the committee, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.), said Mr. Yurchenko may have been fooling the U.S. all along as a double agent. "We got some good stuff," Mr. Durenberger said, "but if in fact it turned out he was a double defector, you have egg on your face."

Mr. Yurchenko said that at one point in his interrogation he was brought to CIA headquarters at Langley, Va., for a dinner with Mr. Casey, but added that he didn't remember much about it because he had been drugged beforehand. He said that last week he was brought to a Washington suburb after refusing to sign a CIA contract offering him a $1 million "down payment" and $180,000 annual salary for life for cooperating with the U.S.

"I'm very proud I managed to escape . . . but I don't tell the details," Mr. Yurchenko said.

The State Department said Mr. Yurchenko was deputy chief of the North American department of the KGB's first chief directorate, a position that made him responsible for directing Soviet intelligence operations in the U.S. and Canada. Previously he had served as top security officer here in the Soviet Embassy from 1975 to 1980.

U.S. officials said Mr. Yurchenko revealed a wealth of Soviet spy information, including information on two cases that the CIA made public. One of them involved the alleged spying of a former CIA trainee, Edward Howard, whom Mr. Yurchenko reportedly identified as having given the Soviets sensitive information about U.S. operatives in the Soviet Union. Mr. Howard mysteriously left his home in New Mexico last month shortly before FBI agents, acting on information from Mr. Yurchenko, came to arrest him.

Late last month, the CIA disclosed that Mr. Yurchenko also had provided an answer to the disappearance of Nicholas G. Shadrin, a U.S. double agent who was last seen Dec. 20, 1975, preparing for a meeting with KGB agents in Vienna. In the Yurchenko version of the story leaked to the press by the CIA, Mr. Shadrin was given a fatal overdose of chloroform while KGB agents attempted to smuggle him out of Austria. Mr. Yurchenko yesterday accused the CIA of making the story up.

The State Department called Mr. Yurchenko's accusations "completely false and without any foundation." The department said the Soviet had defected "of his own volition to the American embassy in Rome" and had signed a note Aug. 1 requesting asylum in the U.S.

The State Department said, "Since his arrival in the U.S. on Aug. 2, Mr. Yurchenko has willingly cooperated with both the Central Intelligence Agency and the FBI in providing information about Soviet intelligence activities throughout the world and the organization of the KGB. At no time was Mr. Yurchenko held or coerced by improper, illegal, or unethical means."

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